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English Literary Studies: Origins and Nature

Robert Irvine

It is not obvious why novels and plays and poems should be studied in universities under the title of 'English Studies' or 'English Literature'. Because 'English' is a subject in secondary school, it seems natural to us now that a similar subject should be on offer at university. But nobody thought to give university lectures on English authors until the middle of the eighteenth century, and before that nobody, it seems, complained that they weren't there. A whole degree in 'English Literature' was not on offer until the twentieth century, so compared to philosophy or theology or law, ours is a fairly new academic discipline. Literary criticism more generally, it is true, seems to be as old as European literature itself. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a book discussing the purpose and nature of tragic drama, for instance. But until the periods I've mentioned, academic discussion of imaginative writing was of writing in Latin and Greek: classical literature, which enjoyed enormous prestige as part of the foundations of European civilization. This chapter will run through the story of how writing in English came to have a place on the university curriculum, and what was done with it once it was there. It is a useful story to know, but not because our discipline today has necessarily evolved out of these older versions of itself. On the contrary, many of the approaches to literature that this chapter will describe were dead ends, from which the subject had to back up and start again down a different route. But thinking about these other approaches can help us define what we want from English Studies today: both how we do it, in our seminars and essays, and what it is for, in relation to society more generally.

English literature first enters the university in the 1760s, in Scotland, but it does so under the (to us) strange-sounding label of 'Rhetoric and Belles Lettres'. This was the title given to the series of lectures given by Adam Smith (now most famous as an economist) at Glasgow University, and Hugh Blair at Edinburgh. 'Rhetoric' is an ancient subject of study, going back to classical times. It is the study of the art of public speaking, and in particular the persuasive speech-making of political debate and legal process. Most of the (all male) students attending the lectures of Smith and Blair were studying for the law or for the church, so public speech was going to be part of their future professions. But these lectures bracket rhetoric with 'belles lettres', a French phrase taken over into English in the eighteenth century to suggest fine *writing* rather than powerful speech, consumed in private rather than produced in public. For Smith and Blair, developing our taste for literary writers helps us cultivate our personal sympathy with other people more generally. This helps us become *sociable* in a distinctly *modern* way, based on shared tastes and feelings, rather than on membership of a particular political or religious denomination (the sort of groups rallied by traditional rhetoric).

On the other hand, those tastes and feelings were understood to be those of a particular, high, stratum of society. Most of the students taught by Smith and Blair were from Scots-speaking families who had made some money in commerce, or who owned some land. Studying the writing of Jonathan Swift or Joseph Addison, the authors most frequently recommended by Smith and Blair, gave them a standard of English to which they could aspire. A more 'refined' English would make it easier for these middle-class boys to socialise with those in the class above them, and with their English peers, with all the career advantages that might follow. Note that this eighteenth-century version of literary study does not distinguish between what we now call 'literature' (poems, plays and novels) and other sorts of writing. Periodical essays in politics or philosophy, or historical or biographical writing, are all part of 'literature' on this view. Blair and Smith recommend the journalism and political satire of Addison and Swift as much as their poetry or drama. Yet reading these texts as 'belles lettres' seems to involve ignoring the original *political* function of such writing. Addison and Swift were deeply committed to criticising and reforming their society; but for Smith

and Blair, 50 years later, all that matters about such writing is its *style*, divorced from the purpose to which it was originally put.

At the same time as the lectures of Smith and Blair, English literary studies was being taught in England, but not at its two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, which remained committed to the classical curriculum. Instead, it was taught at the new academies set up by 'Dissenters': that is, Protestants who rejected the Church of England, and who were banned from the English universities because of this. Many of those who taught in the dissenting academies had studied in Scotland instead, sharing its Presbyterian religion as they did. The literary studies they introduced ran along similar lines to the lectures of Smith and Blair; but the academies' students were mostly destined for commerce rather than the law (where their religion might again cause problems), and studied English alongside natural science (also unknown in Oxbridge at this time) and practical subjects such as accounting. If the social function of literary study in Scotland was primarily *fitting in* with modern Britain, in the academies it was *getting on* despite it.

A combination of English dissenters and Scottish intellectuals also went on to break Oxford and Cambridge's duopoly on higher education in England by founding a new university there. University College London opened in 1828 and included on its staff Britain's first 'Professor of English Language and Literature'. The political establishment responded by founding a rival institution, King's College London, the following year; by 1835 it had a 'Professor of English Literature and History' too. As the nineteenth century continued, more new universities were founded in other cities across England, Ireland and Wales, and these usually had a Professor of English Literature as well. Older universities followed suit: Glasgow in 1862, and Trinity College Dublin in 1867. At last Cambridge University established an examination board in 'Medieval and Modern Languages' which included English as one of its topics in 1878; Oxford established a Professorship in English Language and Literature in 1885; and Cambridge a separate Professorship in English Literature in 1911.

By that point, however, 'English Literature' had changed out of all recognition from the subject taught in Scotland and in the dissenting academies at the end of the eighteenth century. A canon of great writers, from Chaucer through Spenser and Shakespeare to Milton, Dryden and Pope, had been established as an 'English tradition' in literature; 'literature' was now understood much more narrowly as meaning poems and plays (the status of the novel as 'literature' was controversial). In one sense, this was a much more *historical* way of looking at English writing. Each great author was understood in relation to his (you'll notice they were all male) predecessors, and as building upon their achievements. This new approach also connected literary study very closely to the history of the language, starting with the Old English poems and chronicles of the Anglo-Saxons. English Literature was understood as developing continuously through time just as the language had done. But in another sense, this was a very *unhistorical* way of reading poems and plays. The 'English tradition' was imagined as smoothly continuous, even when English *society* had suffered the sudden dislocations of reformation, civil war, and economic upheaval. Each literary text was understood in relation to other literary texts before and after, not in relation to the political or economic situation in which it was first written or published.

This lack of interest in political contexts was taken over from Smith, Blair, and the dissenters. But where they had seen literary study as a way of becoming *modern*, English Literature in the nineteenth-century universities became instead a way of connecting yourself to the *past*. It allowed students to understand themselves as the inheritors of an English national identity that was embodied in the nation's literature. For the nineteenth-century universities increasingly understood language as a 'racial' characteristics passed down through the generations. The great literature of a language expressed the unchanging spirit of the race that spoke it. This was why its progress was untroubled by the various political, religious and economic discontinuities that afflicted the actual society of these islands. And since Great Britain had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become

the most powerful and most far-flung empire the world had ever seen, history had demonstrated that the spirit expressed in English Literature was that of a race *superior* to all the others. For Smith, Blair, and the dissenters, literary study had taught you how to *do* something; a century later, studying English Literature taught you how to *be* something, namely more completely English.

This ideology of race was not only (or even primarily) developed in response to Britain's overseas expansion, however. It was also a response to the profound class divisions that had opened up in nineteenth century Britain. Living and working conditions for workers in the expanding industrial cities were terrible. Most middle-class men had been granted the vote by the Reform Act of 1832; but those who owned no property, the vast majority of the population, were still excluded from the franchise. In the 1840s, the working-class campaign for the vote ('Chartism') caused panic among the property-owning classes. For the rest of the century, they sought to find means of reconciling working men to their subordinate position while leaving Britain's political and social institutions unchanged. One of those means was education. As industrialism became more advanced, it became obvious that Britain required a more *technically* educated workforce in any case, and a multitude of 'Mechanics' Institutes' were set up to meet this demand. But a man may have an excellent technical education and still resent living in a slum, and having no say in the government of his country. Step forward English Literature, which required no classical education to read, and offered its students at once an experience of great art to distract and console, and a version of national identity which was disconnected from political institutions. Through an appreciation of Shakespeare and Milton, working-class readers could feel themselves to be sharing in a national life more ancient and important than the nation's current political institutions. Literary study might be the means whereby Britain, fractured along class lines, could be reintegrated along the lines of imagined 'race', without having to give working people the vote. And if English Literature was to be taught alongside technical subjects in Mechanics' Institutes and other evening classes, teachers would be needed to teach it. Hence the development of courses in the subject at university level. More directly, English Literature at university could appeal to another group denied both the vote and a classical education: women. Barred from most professions such as the law and medicine, and from training in the natural sciences, young middle-class women sought out other sources of intellectual fulfilment, and by the end of the century had new career opportunities as teachers and office-workers. They too could be accommodated in English classes, the reading of literature fostering the feminine powers of sympathy natural to them, and infusing them with the spiritual heritage of their race.

The paragraphs above describe the nineteenth-century origins of English Literature at university as initiated by a ruling class as a means of deflecting threats to its monopoly on power. But of course there was no way of ensuring that literary studies would have this effect in the case of any particular student. Any learning, once achieved, does not itself dictate the use to which it is put. Discovering that, however materially poor, you are nevertheless the inheritor of literary riches by virtue of your membership of the English nation, might be an empowering experience. A working man or woman might deduce from *King Lear* or *Paradise Lost* a version of 'England' quite different from that of their bosses. He or she would certainly find plenty in Blake or Shelley to give the legitimacy of the 'English tradition' to their joining a trade union, or organising a rent strike. Similarly, if women's work in passing on the tradition in the class-room was so important, it might occur to many women that they could be trusted with the vote.

In any case, British society was changing under the feet (as it were) of the tradition's guardians in the universities. Rapidly increasing rates of literacy among ordinary people, and a general increase in prosperity in the decades before the First World War, meant the development of a mass market for books such as had not existed before. In the first decades of the twentieth century, new technologies such as the cinema and radio also cultivated a mass audience. The last property qualifications for the vote were finally abolished for men in 1918, and for women in 1928: politically, Great Britain became a democracy.

One of the most significant developments in English Studies in the 1920s and 1930s was a response to these changes. Some university teachers, of whom I.A. Richards and F.R. and Q.D. Leavis at Cambridge were the most influential, saw the rise of 'mass civilization' as a threat to what they called 'culture'. In using the latter term, they were drawing on the thinking of the important Victorian intellectual Matthew Arnold. For Richards and the Leavises, as for Arnold before them, reading great literature offered an experience of wholeness and harmony that was otherwise unavailable in the modern world. By doing so, it provided the reader with an ideal standard against which that world could be judged, and to which the reader could aspire in the organisation of their own lives. But this experience of great literature depended on the reader being capable of reading it in a particular way. The products of commercial culture (movies and advertising as well as popular fiction) did not cultivate the critical skills required to properly understand a poem by John Donne or a novel by George Eliot; on the contrary, they tended to deaden the faculties, turning the mind into the passive absorber of lazy sentiment. The higher values embodied in 'culture' had to be inculcated through a rigorous training; and this meant that their preservation in the modern world would be a task for a very few finely tuned individuals, such as I.A. Richards, F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, and their students.

This seems like a very anti-democratic version of the social function of English Studies, giving legitimacy to the idea that only the few could really understand literature, and implying that everyone else should submit to their judgements. However, once again, the intentions behind these innovations could not determine the use to which they were put. For one thing, the critical training that this approach called for was based on close attention to the particularities of individual literary texts. Identifying the 'wholeness' or 'harmony' that literary texts achieved, and in which lay their moral lesson, required careful analyses of the structure and imagery of a poem, or the characterization and narrative point-of-view of a novel (the Leavises were among the first to take the novel seriously as 'literature'). That is, it required the skills of 'close reading' that remain at the basis of English Studies today, and which much of this volume is dedicated to explaining. For another, the Richards/Leavis approach assumed that the job of literary studies was *not* to reconcile students to their society, to help them fit in, get on, or knuckle under. On the contrary, the English school in a university was to be a place from which students could learn to *criticise* their society. The literary values in which they were trained were to be put to work in *opposition* to their society's dominant values. Now, for Richards and the Leavises, that opposition was to be a conservative resistance to democracy and 'mass civilization'. But once this critical role for English Studies was established, later teachers could use it to make quite other sorts of criticisms, as we shall see.

Indeed, similar techniques of close reading were developed, and taken much further, in the perhaps more confidently democratic context of the United States. The American universities had adopted the teaching of rhetoric and composition on the Scottish model from their inception; they had also, more surprisingly, taught English Literature as an ethnic tradition, and in relation to the history of the language, in a very similar way to British universities, although American Literature began to be taught in its own right from the late nineteenth century as well. In the late 1930s and 1940s, American teachers developed an approach to studying literature which was immediately christened 'the New Criticism': the best known New Critics being John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley. They picked up from I.A. Richards an emphasis on the internal structure and coherence of the literary text, in contrast to the chaos of everyday experience (which included, by now, the Second World War), and the job of criticism as the analysis and explication of that internal complexity. But they also articulated a much more convincing intellectual rationale for this approach, untroubled by the cultural pessimism of Richards and the Leavises. Indeed, the social context of the New Criticism gave it a political purpose quite at odds with those of the Cambridge conservatives. Teachers of English Literature in mid-century American universities were faced with students many of whose parents had arrived in the great waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 'English Tradition' was not

something that these students held in common. They shared the language, however, and a short text, usually a lyric poem, could be explained in the classroom with direct reference to the words on the page in front of the students. Referring only to the text in itself made it possible to offer the experience of English Literature to students from widely different backgrounds.

It was in the 1960s that a shift in the nature of literary studies began, which remains the context in which English Literature is taught in universities today. To greatly simplify a very complex set of intellectual and institutional developments, one can think of this in terms of the rejection of the two assumptions shared by Richards, Leavis, and the various American schools: the comparative lack of interest in historical contexts, and the emphasis on the internal coherence of the literary text, of a system of genres, or indeed of a national 'tradition' as a whole. On the one hand, historical contexts, the political and economic situations in which texts were produced and to which they were responses, were put back at the centre of the discipline by approaches informed by the thinking of nineteenth-century German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche (and the latter's post-war French follower, Michel Foucault). On the other hand, the idea that any text could achieve a self-contained wholeness or coherence has been dismantled by critics drawing on various 'post-structuralist' thinkers, but especially on the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. But, although there are serious differences between the intellectual underpinnings of Marxist, 'New Historicist' (Foucauldian), and post-structuralist or 'deconstructive' ways of reading, in practice they often combine and overlap in all sorts of productive ways.

What all these approaches make very problematic is any talk of the relative *value* of literary texts. For Hugh Blair, for the nineteenth-century professors, for the Cambridge people in the '20s and '30s, and for the New Critics in the '40s, there was no question about this: some texts, and some types of writing, were just better than others. They knew which they were, and their job was to teach students this; in the twentieth century, at least, they could also give some account of *why* these texts were better than others. The historicism of the Marxists and the Foucauldians, however, locates the meaning of the text in the political and social *function* it had in its original context and, perhaps, in later contexts too. (This chapter has attempted to do something similar with 'English Studies'.) Literary writing, understood in this way, is always implicated in the power structures of its society. If it often appears to belong to a higher realm, to reflect timeless ideals or a universal 'human nature', that is precisely how it makes the power of a particular class seem 'natural' and thus inevitable. What counts as a 'good' or 'great' literary text at any point in time may be a measure of its success in pulling off this kind of trick. Deconstructive approaches may be ready to concede the greater ambition towards internal coherence of some texts rather than others. But, because of the instabilities of meaning identified by post-structuralist theory, they are still bound to miss this goal, and the most we can say about a 'great' work of literature it is that is a particularly impressive failure.

The up side of this suspension of the question of value is that what counts as 'literature' has expanded once again, to the all-inclusive scope it enjoyed for Hugh Blair and Adam Smith. The narrow canon of the 'English Tradition' as it was taught in the nineteenth century is now revealed as the politically-motivated creation it always was, and English Studies is constantly alert to the ways in which political considerations (of race or gender, for example) may be motivating the inclusion or exclusion of particular texts from those that get taught in universities. The social context for this development is the massive expansion of higher education all over the English-speaking world from the 1960s onwards: young people going to university were drawn from a much wider cross-section of society than had previously been the case. Those students were also more ready than previous generations to question the values embodied in institutions like universities, thanks to the general democratisation of culture in Britain in the 1960s and '70s, and the disillusion produced in America in the same period by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The revolution in the discipline that I have described in the previous two paragraphs has been enormously controversial, especially

in the U.S., where the academic ‘theory wars’ were understood as part of the ‘culture wars’ over what sort of values U.S. institutions were supposed to promote. But this controversy perhaps rests on a misunderstanding of what education is for. As I hope this chapter has shown, what gets taught, and how it is taught, can never completely determine the use that the student makes of that teaching. That remains as true today as at any point in the development of ‘English Studies’ as an academic discipline.

Further Reading

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